

# Barbarians with Class

*By Skip Williams*



A big, dumb fighter-type clad in furs who hacks up the enemy in a berserk rage -- that's the quintessential fantasy image of the barbarian -- or perhaps the stereotypical one. This particular image also portrays the barbarian as uncouth, uncultured, and generally uninhibited. Such a character appeals to all of us from time to time, but moving beyond the stereotype allows the creation of a character with great depth and a wide array of useful abilities.

## The Pros and Cons of a Barbarian

The barbarian is made for fighting, but he's definitely more than just an uncivilized fighter. He comes with his own set of advantages and disadvantages.

## Barbarian Assets

When you choose a barbarian, you have plenty of options for creating an interesting character. Below are several assets you have going for you with a character of this class.

- **High Hit Points:** The barbarian's 12-sided Hit Dice give him unmatched hit points, especially if he has a decent Constitution score.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A barbarian's base attack bonus is +1 per level, which is the best in the game. Thus, a barbarian can take on almost any foe and expect to land effective blows.
- **Good Fortitude Saves:** A barbarian uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural hardiness helps him resist most effects that attack his body, such as poison, polymorphing, and energy draining.
- **Good Weapon Selection:** Because he can use any simple or martial weapon, a barbarian is a deadly opponent with just about any weapon in his hand.
- **Good Armor Class:** A barbarian is proficient with light and medium armor and every kind of shield except a tower shield. The lack of heavy armor keeps his Armor Class rating from reaching the stratosphere, but a properly equipped barbarian is no slouch when it comes to defense.
- **Rage:** A barbarian is an efficient fighter in most circumstances, but his signature ability -- rage -- turns him into a veritable killing machine. The Strength boost that rage provides makes his attacks more potent, and the Constitution increase makes him extra tough, at least for a short time.
- **Defensive Abilities:** A 2nd-level barbarian's uncanny dodge ability keeps him from suffering the usual ill effects when he is surprised or otherwise caught off guard. Some of his other class features -- especially the ability to avoid traps (gained at 3rd level) and the ability to resist blows (gained at 7th level) -- also help to protect him from harm.
- **Quick Movement:** A barbarian who isn't carrying a heavy load or wearing heavy armor enjoys a modest

boost in speed that helps him cover ground in a hurry.

- **Good Skill Selection:** The barbarian has a substantial list of class skills that make him alert, mobile, and self-sufficient.

## Barbarian Weaknesses

As with members of any other character class, the barbarian's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a barbarian character.

- **Poor Reflex and Will Saving Throws:** Barbarians have the worst progression for Reflex and Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This drawback means they aren't so great at avoiding most kinds of magical attacks.
- **Illiterate:** Unless he spends some skill points to learn how to read and write (or takes levels in some other class), your barbarian character remains illiterate for life. Illiteracy usually isn't a deadly flaw, but it can prove embarrassing or inconvenient.
- **Curiously Vulnerable:** In spite of the barbarian's formidable defenses, he can die quite easily if you aren't careful about how you play him. His rage ability lowers his Armor Class just when he needs it most, and his superior speed makes it easy to outrun his allies just when their aid might be most valuable. Furthermore, the loss of his temporary hit points after rage makes it easy for him to die after giving his all.

## Playing a Classy Barbarian

Great barbarians usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing such a character, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

### Be Flexible

Even though you're clearly a combat-oriented character, you can fill many different roles in an adventuring party. Your fighting ability makes you a suitable candidate for party leader, no matter where the group goes. Your Strength also comes in handy for workaday tasks that are best performed at the front of the party, such as smashing down locked doors.

On the other hand, your speed and perception skills can make you an effective scout. Or you might consider functioning as the group's rear guard, since your uncanny dodge ability lets you shake off surprise attacks and your speed lets you reach the front of the group quickly when the need arises.

If you're prepared to do what your party needs, you'll quickly become invaluable to the group.

### Rage Early, Rage Often

Your rage ability is so powerful that you may be tempted to keep it in reserve, but doing so isn't always the best plan. It's best to rage when you're close to full hit points, so that you're less likely to literally die on your feet.

### Friends in Need

Your fighting ability provides a great boost to your party's overall combat prowess. If you waste or misuse that ability, the whole party suffers. Likewise, you'll often need the support of the rest of your group just to survive.

**The Party's Scout:** If you're not the party's scout, your great speed and fighting prowess make you the obvious person to rescue that character when misfortune strikes (and it often does).

**The Party's Arcane Spellcaster:** This character is everything you're not: weak, vulnerable, and delicate. So be prepared to put yourself between the arcane spellcaster and the enemy when needed -- or at least be ready to come to her aid when danger approaches.

**The Party's Divine Spellcaster:** Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can keep you alive, especially when you're coming out of a rage with heavy damage.

## Some Key Equipment

As a barbarian, you rely heavily on your gear, so it pays to collect the right equipment. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor and Shield:** Get the best medium armor you can afford because you'll need that Armor Class. You should also plan to carry a heavy shield unless you intend to use a two-handed weapon. And don't overlook other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*. Keep in mind that several lesser items with bonuses that stack can give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.

If you do a lot of wilderness adventuring, consider some backup armor, such as suit of studded leather (or a mithral chain shirt, if you can afford it) that you can wear at night. If you try to sleep in heavy armor you'll have penalties the next day. But if you sleep in your skivvies, you'll be in trouble if you're attacked in the night.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** For sheer damage-dealing ability, nothing beats a two-handed weapon, such as a greatsword or greataxe -- especially when you're raging or using the Power Attack feat (or both). But a two-handed weapon does prevent you from using a shield, and you need all the Armor Class you can get. Furthermore, a weapon with a big damage multiplier can help you get the most out of your Strength score and rage ability when you confirm a critical hit. Given all those considerations, a battleaxe is a great choice. Alternatively, if you want to spend a feat on an exotic weapon, consider a dwarven waraxe.
  - **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon or two handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have another weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a battleaxe (a slashing weapon), consider a morningstar (which deals both bludgeoning and piercing damage) as a backup.
  - **Ranged Weapon:** Your forte is melee combat, but you won't always be able to reach your foes, and your allies won't always want to go toe-to-toe with the enemy. A composite bow is a great choice because you can spend a little extra money on it and add your Strength bonus to damage.
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**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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